

LECTURE X.

MERE THEISM INSUFFICIENT.

I

I HAVE endeavoured to show, in the course of lectures which I am now bringing to a close, that the light of nature and the works of creation and providence prove the existence, and so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God. This truth ought always to be combined with another—namely, that the light of nature and the works of creation and providence “are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation.” Reason sends forth a true light which is to be trusted and followed so far as it extends, but which is much more limited than the wants of human nature. The deepest discoveries and the highest achievements of the unaided intellect need to be supplemented by truths which can only come to us through special revelation. The natural knowledge of God which

man can attain by the exercise of his own faculties is not sufficient to make him feel that the Eternal bears to him fatherly love, or to break the power of sin within him and over him, or to sustain and develop his moral and spiritual life. It falls far short of what is required to enable a human soul, a religious and immortal being, to accomplish its true destination. It falls far short, in other words, of being what is "necessary unto salvation," in the broad and comprehensive sense which the term salvation bears throughout Scripture.

There are those who, instead of regarding theism as simply so much fundamental truth which Christianity presupposes and applies, would oppose theism to Christianity, and substitute theism for Christianity. They would rest in mere theism and would reject Christianity. They represent theism, dissociated from Christianity, as all-sufficient, and as the religion to which alone the future belongs. In doing so, these men—many of them most earnest and excellent men—seem to me to show great want of reflection, great ignorance of the teachings of history, and a very superficial acquaintance with human nature.

Atheism, polytheism, and pantheism have always proved stronger than mere theism—more popular, more influential on ordinary minds. It is only in alliance with revelation that theism has been able to cope successfully with these foes. In

no land, and in no age, has a theism resting exclusively on the authority of reason gained and retained the assent of more than a small minority of the community. Its adherents may have been men who did credit to their creed—honourable, high-minded, cultivated men—but they have always been few. In India, in Persia, in Greece, in Rome, some specially gifted and religious minds reached, or at least approached, theism; but, on the whole, the development of belief in all these countries was not towards but away from theism. The Israelites, although authoritatively taught monotheism, fell back again and again into polytheism. Mythology is not merely “a disease of language,” but also a testimony to the fact that the minds and hearts of the mass of mankind cannot be satisfied with a deity who is only to be apprehended by abstract thought,—a proof that while a few speculative philosophers may rest content with the God discovered by pure reason, the countless millions of their fellow-men are so influenced by sense, imagination, and feeling, that they have ever been found to substitute for such a God deities whom they could represent under visible forms, as subject to the limitations of space and time, and as actuated by the passions of humanity. Pantheism has a powerful advantage over theism, inasmuch as it can give a colouring of religion to what is virtually atheism, and a semblance of reason even

to the most wildly extravagant polytheism. There is no logical necessity why a mere theist should become an atheist, but the causes which tend to produce atheism are too strong to be counteracted by any force inherent in mere theism ; and hence, as a matter of historical fact, mere theism has always, even in modern Christendom, largely given place to atheism. All the powers of the world above, and of the world to come, are needed to oppose the powers of the world below, and of the world which now is. Only a much fuller exhibition of the Divine character than is presented to us by mere theism can make faith in God the ruling principle of human life. Mere theism might have sufficed us had we remained perfectly rational and perfectly sinless ; but those who fancy that it is sufficient for men as they are, only make evident that they know not what men are. In the state into which we have fallen, we need a higher light to guide us than any which shines on sea or land ; we need the light which only shines from the gracious countenance of Christ.

“The world by wisdom knew not God.” The whole history of the heathen world testifies to the truth of this affirmation of St Paul. It is an indubitable historical fact that, outside of the sphere of special revelation, man has never obtained such a knowledge of God as a responsible and religious being plainly requires. The wisdom of the heathen

world, at its very best, was utterly inadequate to the accomplishment of such a task as creating a due abhorrence of sin, controlling the passions, purifying the heart, and ennobling the conduct. Not one religion devised by man rested on a worthy view of the character of God; not one did not substitute for the living and true God false and dead idols, or represent Him in a mean and dishonouring light. We are apt to associate with the religion of Greece and Rome the religious philosophy of a few eminent Greek and Roman thinkers who rose above the religion of their age and country. The religion itself was mainly the creation of imagination, and in various respects was extremely demoralising in its tendencies. The worshippers of Jupiter and Juno, of Mars and Venus, and the gods and goddesses who were supposed to be their companions, must have been very often not the better but the worse for worshipping such beings. Certainly, they could find no elevating ideal or correct and consistent rule of moral life among the capricious and unrighteous and impure objects of their adoration. It was less from the religion, the idolatrous polytheism, of Greece and Rome that the human soul in these lands drew spiritual inspiration, than from philosophy, from reason apprehending those truths of natural religion which the positive religion concealed and disfigured and contradicted. If salvation be deliverance from darkness

to light, from sin to holiness, from love of the world to love of God, no sane man will say that the Greek or Roman religion was the way to it, or an indication of the way to it.

Did, then, the philosophers discover the way? There is no need that we should depreciate what they did. Men like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, among the Greeks—like Cicero, Epictetus, and Antoninus among the Romans—obtained wonderful glimpses of Divine truth, and gave to the world noble moral instructions, which are of inestimable value even to this day. But they all failed to effect any deep and extensive reform. They did not turn men from the worship of idols to the service of the true God. They were unable to raise any effective barrier either against superstition or against vice. They were insufficiently assured in their own minds, and spoke as without authority to others. They saw too clearly to be able to believe that the popular religion was true, but not clearly enough to know what to put in its place. In the systems and lives of the very greatest of them there were terrible defects, and neither the doctrine nor the conduct of the majority of those who pretended to follow them, the common specimens of philosophers, was fitted to improve society. Philosophy found out *many truths*, but not *the truth*. It did not disclose the holiness and love of God—discovered no antidote for the poison of sin—

showed the soul no fountain of cleansing, healing and life.

The true character of the philosophical theism of antiquity has been thus admirably described by a very able theologian: "Theism was discussed as a philosophical, not as a religious question,—as one rationale among others of the origin of the material universe, but as no more affecting practice than any great scientific hypothesis does now. Theism was not a test which separated the orthodox philosopher from the heterodox, which distinguished belief from disbelief; it established no breach between the two opposing theorists; it was discussed amicably as an open question: and well it might be, for of all questions there was not one which could make less practical difference to the philosopher, or, upon his view, to anybody, than whether there was or was not a God. Nothing would have astonished him more than, when he had proved in the lecture-hall the existence of a God, to have been told to worship Him. 'Worship whom?' he would have exclaimed; 'worship what? worship how?' Would you picture him indignant at the polytheistic superstition of the crowd, and manifesting some spark of the fire of St Paul 'when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry,' you could not be more mistaken. He would have said that you did not see a plain distinction; that the crowd was right

on the religious question, and the philosopher right on the philosophical; that however men might uphold in argument an infinite abstraction, they could not worship it; and that the hero was much better fitted for worship than the Universal Cause—fitted for it not in spite of, but in consequence of, his want of true divinity. The same question was decided in the same way in the speculations of the Brahmans. There the Supreme Being figures as a characterless, impersonal essence, the mere residuum of intellectual analysis, pure unity, pure simplicity. No temple is raised to him, no knee is bended to him. Without action, without will, without affection, without thought, he is the substratum of everything, himself a nothing. The Universal Soul is the Unconscious Omnipresent *Looker-on*; the complement, as coextensive spectator, of the universal drama of nature; the motionless mirror upon which her boundless play and sport, her versatile postures, her multitudinous evolutions are reflected, as the image of the rich and changing sky is received into the passive bosom of the lake. Thus the idea of God, so far from calling forth in the ancient world the idea of worship, ever stood in antagonism with it: the idol was worshipped because he was not God, God was not worshipped because He was. One small nation alone out of all antiquity worshipped God, believed the universal Being to be a personal Being. That nation was

looked upon as a most eccentric and unintelligible specimen of humanity for doing so; but this whimsical fancy, as it appeared in the eyes of the rest, was cherished by it as the most sacred deposit; it was the foundation of its laws and polity; and from this narrow stock this conception was engrafted upon the human race.”¹

It is historically certain, then, that the world by its unaided wisdom failed to know God. Of course, it may be said that the experiment was incomplete; that even if Christianity had not appeared, the human mind would have found out in process of time all the religious truth needed to satisfy the human heart, guide human life, and sustain human society. But such an assertion is quite arbitrary. History gives it no confirmation. It was only after human wisdom had a lengthened and unembarrassed opportunity of showing what it could accomplish in the most favourable circumstances, and after it had clearly displayed its insufficiency, that Christianity appeared. Christ did not come till it was manifest that reason was wandering farther and farther away from God—that religion had no inherent principle of self-improvement—that man had done his utmost with the unaided resources of his nature to devise a salvation, and had failed. There was no probability whatever that a new and higher civilisation would rise on the ruins

¹ Canon Mozley, *On Miracles*, Lect. IV.

of that which fell when the hordes of Northern barbarians subdued and overran the Roman empire, had not Christianity been present to direct the work of construction.

We need not, however, discuss what might or might not have happened, supposing the sun of Christianity had not appeared on the horizon when that of classical civilisation was hastening to its setting, since it is obvious that the science and philosophy even of the present day, dis-severed from revelation, can produce no religion capable of satisfying, purifying, and elevating man's spiritual nature. They are far advanced beyond the stage which they had reached in the time of St Paul. Knowledge has since received large accessions from all sides, and reflection has been taught by a lengthened and varied process of correction and discipline valuable lessons. In mathematical and physical science especially there has been enormous progress. The human mind is now enriched not only with the intellectual wealth which it has inherited from Greece and Rome, but with that of many ages not less fruitful than those in which they flourished. Can we accomplish, then, what the Greeks and Romans so signally failed to achieve? Can we, with all our knowledge of nature and man, devise a religion which shall be at once merely rational and thoroughly effective? Can we, when we set aside

Christianity, construct a creed capable of not only commanding the assent of the intellect, but of attracting and changing the heart, quickening and guiding the conscience, and purifying and ennobling the conduct? Can we build a system worthy to be called a religion on any other foundation than that which has been laid in the Gospel? If science and philosophy cannot do anything of this kind even at the present day, we are surely at length entitled to say that the world needs to know more about God than it can find out for itself. In proof that they cannot, we would appeal both to facts and reason—both to the character of what science and philosophy have actually done in this connection, and to the nature of the task which their injudicious friends would impose on them.

What, then, even at the present day, do the ablest of those who reject Christianity propose to offer us instead? Comte would have us to worship humanity. Can we? Comte himself did not believe that we can in any but a very partial and insincere way. If we could, would our worship do either our minds or hearts more good than the worship of Jupiter and Juno did the Greeks of old? Strauss would have us to revere the universe. Is that not to go back to fetichism? Might we not just as wisely and profitably adore a stock or stone? Herbert Spencer would present to us for God the

Unknowable. But what thoughts, what feelings, can we have about the Unknowable? Might we not as well worship empty space, the eternal no, or the absolute nothing? Schopenhauer, Hartmann, Mainlander, and others, would have us to go back to Buddhism and welcome annihilation. But it is clear as the light that if the advice were acted on, the springs of intellectual life and social progress would soon be dried up. The philosophy and science on which they exclusively rely have enabled none of these men to find out God; nay, they have left them under the delusion that there is no God to find out, except those strange gods to which I have referred. And being without God in the world, these philosophers, with all their knowledge and accomplishments, are also without any hope of a life beyond the grave. No man need go to them with the question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Among all their differences—and they are many and radical—on one point they are agreed, and it is that eternal life is but a dream; that the highest hope even of the best of mankind is to survive for a time as a memory and an influence in the minds and conduct of others, after having ceased to be real and personal beings; that the only form in which the aspiration after immortality can be rationally cherished is that which the greatest of contemporary novelists and among the great-

est of contemporary poets has expressed in the words:—

“O may I join the choir invisible
 Of those immortal dead who live again
 In minds made better by their presence : live
 In pulses stirred to generosity,
 In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
 For miserable aims that end with self,
 In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,
 And with their mild persistence urge man’s search
 To vaster issues. . . .
 This is life to come,
 Which martyred men have made more glorious
 For us who strive to follow.”

It is as true, then, as ever it was, that the world by wisdom knows not God. The advantages which the eighteen Christian centuries have brought us only make more manifest the world’s inability by its own wisdom to know God. The longer the trial has lasted, the more manifest has it become that God’s revelation of Himself is indispensable—is that for which man can provide no substitute. The philosophy which sets itself in opposition to revelation—which professes to supply in another and better way the spiritual wants to which revelation responds—which aims at constructing a religion out of the conclusions of science—is a mournful failure. The only religious constructions which it has been able to raise, even with all the scientific resources of the nineteenth century at its command, are simply monuments of human folly.

This is just what was to be expected ; for apart

from special Divine teaching, apart from special Divine revelation, man cannot truly know God, as a sinful being needs to know Him. Apart, for example, from the revelation which God has made of Himself in Christ, the mind cannot possibly attain to a sincere and well-grounded conviction even of that primary truth on which all the perfection of religion and all the happiness and hopes of mankind depend—the truth that God is really a Father, with all a Father's love, to the children of men. There are manifold signs or evidences of God's goodness and bounty in creation and providence, but, unless seen in the light reflected on them from redemption, they fall far short of a complete proof of God's cherishing fatherly love to sinful men. In the light of the Cross it is otherwise; the man who looks at the works of creation in that light will unhesitatingly and with full reason say, "My Father made them all," and will easily and clearly trace in all the dealings of providence a Father's hand guiding His children. Suppose, however, that blessed light not shining or shut out, and that creation and providence are before us in no other light than their own,—what then? What can creation and providence teach us about God?

Substantially this only: that He has vast power, since He has created and sustains and controls the whole of this mighty universe; wondrous wisdom, since He has arranged everything so well and

directs everything so well ; and a goodness corresponding to His power and wisdom, since a beneficent purpose may be detected underlying all His works of creation and pervading the course of providence. I cannot suppose that any one will seriously maintain that creation and providence teach us more than that God is thus powerful and wise and good ; and fully granting that they teach us all this, if any one mean by God being the Father of men no more than that He is as good as He is powerful and wise, and that His power and wisdom have been so employed on behalf of men that good gifts meet them at every step, I readily agree with him that creation and providence are sufficient to show God to be a Father in that sense and to that extent.

But is there nothing more, nothing higher than this, implied in fatherhood among men ? Unquestionably there is. Love in the form of mere goodness is far from the noblest and most distinctive quality in a human father's heart ; nay, there is no true fatherliness of heart at all in a man in whom there is nothing better than that. One can, by an effort of imagination, indeed, conceive a man to have children so absolutely innocent and happy, and so perfectly guarded from all possibility of evil and suffering, that love in the form of goodness or kindness would be the only kind of love he could show them ; but would his fatherly love be

ever really tested in that case? Could he ever show the deeper, the truly distinctive feelings of a father's heart—those we so often see manifested in the toils, the hardships, the dangers, the sacrifices of wealth, comfort, and even life, which parents undertake and endure for their children? Certainly not. Apply this to God. In what sense is He a Father? In what sense has He fatherly love? Among the angels this question could have no place, for they were such perfectly innocent and happy children that love in the form of goodness was all they required—all that could be shown to them. And it would have been the same with men also, if they had not fallen. But so soon as sin, suffering, and death invaded the earth, and seized on man's body and soul, and help or healing there was none for him in any creature, the most awful of questions for the human race came to be, whether or not God was a Father in the full meaning of that term, or, in other words, whether or not He had a love which, in order to save men, would submit to humiliation, suffering, sacrifice?

Now that is what creation and providence cannot prove. Point to anything in creation or to anything in ordinary providence which you can show to have *cost* God anything. You can easily point to thousands and thousands of things and events which you may justly conclude to be signs or gifts of God's goodness; but can you point to

one thing in creation, one event in ordinary providence, which you can seriously maintain to come from a self-sacrificing love such as a father displays when he rushes into a house in flames, or throws himself into a raging flood, to save the life of his child at the risk of his own? If you cannot, you fail to prove God a Father in the sense I mean. And in that sense, which is the true sense, there seems to me no possibility of proving God a Father from creation and providence, apart from redemption.

Wherein is it that both fail? Obviously in this, that they can show no traces of sacrifice on God's part. But it is just here that the revelation of redemption comes in. God, in the unspeakable gift of His Son, shows us a power of sacrifice infinitely above anything known among men—an intensity of tenderest fatherly affection of which the strongest fatherly affection on earth is but a pale and feeble reflection; and Christ in His incarnation, life, sufferings, and death, reveals to us not merely the power, and wisdom, and goodness of God, but the very depths, if we may so speak, of His heart as a Father, enabling us to feel without a doubt that now indeed are we the sons of God. Nothing but a special revelation, however, could thus unveil and disclose God. The natural reason could not thus discern Him by its unaided power. And yet it is only in the knowledge of God as a

Father that the soul can either discern or realise its true destiny.

There are many other precious truths set before us in the Gospel which we might in like manner show to be at once most necessary for human guidance, and inaccessible to unaided human research. We shall not, however, dwell on them, or even enumerate them. The entire problem of our present and future salvation is beyond our powers of solution. The light of nature and the works of creation and providence cannot show man a way of reconciliation to God. No man by mere human wisdom, by any searching into the secrets of nature or providence, can find that out. Mere human wisdom is utter folly here ; and if man may be wise at all in this connection, he must confess his natural folly, the powerlessness of his own reason, and must consent to be guided by the wisdom of God—or, in other words, to accept Christ, who is the wisdom of God to us for salvation, who is God's solution of the problem of our salvation. The only real wisdom possible to man must, from the very nature and necessity of the case, be the wisdom of renouncing his own wisdom. If he say, I shall solve this awful problem for myself, without help from any one, then he in his wisdom is a most manifest fool, whose folly will ruin him ; but if he have the candour to confess his own folly, to admit his own intellect powerless here, and to acknowledge the

wisdom of God and acquiesce in His plan of salvation, then, in the very act of confessing himself foolish he is made wise, for Christ is made wisdom unto him.

The oracle at Delphi pronounced Socrates the wisest of men. Socrates could not understand it, and yet he was unwilling to disbelieve the oracle, so he went about from one person reputed wise to another, in order to be able to say, "here is a wiser man than I am," or at least to find out what the oracle meant. He went to many, but he found that, while they in reality knew almost nothing that was worth knowing, they thought they knew a great deal, and were angry with one who tried to convince them of their ignorance. So that at last Socrates came to recognise that there was a truth in what had been said about him; to use nearly his own words,—“He left them, saying to himself, I am wiser than these men; for neither they nor I, it would seem, know anything valuable: but they, not knowing, fancy that they do know; I, as I really do not know, so I do not think that I know. I seem, therefore, to be in one small matter wiser than they.” Now it is only the kind of spirit which in its degree and about less important matters was in Socrates—it is precisely that kind of spirit about the things which concern eternal life and peace, that can alone make a man wise unto salvation. The most ignorant person, provided he

only know that he must renounce his own wisdom as foolishness—which on subjects pertaining to salvation it really is—and accept what is disclosed in Christ as to salvation, is infinitely wiser than the most able or learned man who trusts solely to his own wisdom apart from Christ's revealed work and will. Both of them are foolish and ignorant ; but the one knows it, and, in consequence of knowing it, accepts Christ's plan of salvation, and is made a partaker of infinite wisdom—the other does not know it, and, thinking that he is wise while he is a fool, remains in his folly, and must bear its punishment.

And now I bring this course of lectures to a close. I trust that they may not have been found wholly without profit, through the blessing of Him who despises not even the smallest and most imperfect service, if humbly rendered to Him. I should rejoice to think that I had helped any one to hold, in such a time as the present, with a firmer and more intelligent grasp, the fundamental truth on which all religious faith must rest. Amen.¹

¹ See Appendix XL.